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An Open Letter to Selena Fox

By Isaac Bonewits

Dear Slena:

A few months ago I received a mailing from Circle in which you asked for (a) money to finish paying off the mortgage for the land Circle has been buying for many eyars, (b) suggestions for fundraising methods, and (c) "ideas and suggestions" as to how Circle should grow.

I also read the mailings put out earlier this year by the "revolutionary" members of Circle, including the transcript of the meeting between them, yourself, and your lawyer. Confused, puzzled, and pained, I talked to you and to your supporters and opponents, including former workers at your headquaters. The more I learned, the more disturbed I became.

Apparently, you are an intensely private person and have always resented people looking at what you consider your personal buisness. Yet my concern for Circle is not gossip, nor is it (as you put it to me) "Sticking my nose where it doesn't belong." Circle is large, international, and has served a unique networking function in our community. If you don't know by now that what happens to you matters to us all, and that you have become a "public figure" in our community, then you've seriously underestimated your own importance.

For many, many Neopagans, Circle was a doorway to the Goddess and to Her people. Our community would be considerably smaller if it hadn't been for the work that Circle did for so many years. That you have been one of the most widely respected, loved, and trusted leaders in the Neopagan community,

makes this letter especially painful to write.

Circle was one of the first groups to buy land for Neopagan use. For years I championed your cause, both because I felt that land purchases were an inevitable evolutionary step for our community and because of the undeniably good work you had done as a networking organization. I recommended you to correspondents who wanted contacts and pointed you out as an example of a Neopagan group that had obtained real estate without getting corrupted.

I no longer feel that I can support you or Circle, or advise others to do so. The change in my attitude has come about slowly, over a period of several eyars, with recent events crystallizing my perceptions. Things add up...

After years of correctly telling folks at gatherings not to take photographs of people without their permission, especially during rituals, you still run around during ceremonies (ignoring the spiritual energies being raised and focussed), or even at skyclad bonfire dances, snapping pictures for your slide collection and Circle Network News. Some of those slides have been shown to strangers all around the country, other photos were published in C.N.N. and even in non-Pagan publications - at least some without the consent of the people depicted. This is only one example of an apparentlky pervasive attitude you seem to have that the rules you impose on others simply don't apply to yourself.

Other examples : After refusing to pay the expenses of other Neopagan teachers to attend and speak at Circle's well-financed events, you demand red-carpet treatment for yourself and your husband to attend and present workshops at events held by others. Despite being constantly recommended by other Neopagan individuals and organizations, you seldom recommend any teacher or group other than yuorself and Circle. After building the "Church of Circle Wicca" as one of the most famous Wiccan churches in the world, you unilaterally decided this year to drop "the W Word" - a position I tend to support for teh community at large, but one whihc seems to leave your thousands of Wiccan members without a voice. You then attempt to declare a copyright on the wide-spread concept of Nature mysticism.

Circle has a reputation as an all-inclusive Neopagan networking organization, yet former Circle workers agree that, for at least five years, you discouraged them from giving networking contacts to inquirers, instead having them sell the Circle Guide To Pagan Groups and ads in C.N.N. Apparently this was originally because doing referrals took too much time out of the limited number of volunteer-hours you had available, yet you never announced

to the community that you had stopped providing local Neopagan contacts, or what you had decided was a higher priority. Worse, after a loud argument with one of Circle's critics, you censored his organization's listings out of the 1990 Guide. Even if this was done with his consent (as one witness claims), it was grossly inappropriate for a reference work that many people believe to be a complete listing of Neopagan resources.

You bought Circle Sanctuary with donations sent by thousands of Neopagans, originally claiming that it would be open and available for general use by the community, and then fenced it about with so many restrictions that it has become essentially your private property. A half-dozen ex-workers at Circle agreed that it was nearly impossible for ordinary Neopagans to visit "their" sanctuary for religious purposes without providing money and/or free labor to you at the same time. Amazingly enough, one couple on the West Coast claims that after donating over $5,000 to Circle they were refused permission to visit the land because they had a small child with them!

Circle's by-laws have never been published, so no one knows for sure who is or isn't a "member" of Circle for voting purposes, nor how your Board of Directors gets elected. You told me that there have been and are other members of your Board of Directors (besides yourself, your husband Dennis and your lawyer), but declined to give me the current names. You opponents tell me that this "secret Board of Directors" is a story you've told for years, but I was able to verify the names of two people who have been Directors in the past. Apparently you policy is simply to have the Board consist of you, your spouse (first Jim and now Dennis) and one other person - a handy way to make sure that you retain majority control.

There are also legitimate questions about the enormous sums of money that have flowed through your hands over the years. I have bveen informed by extremely reliable sources, that you have used one of Circle's checking accounts as a personal one, that normal financial books don't exist and nevr have, that Dennis' education has been paid for in part out of Circle's general funds, and that he forbid workers at your headquaters to open the mail because they ahd been asking questions about incoming bank statements. Futher, Dennis has been quoted mentioning a secret fund that would provide for your personal survival, should Circle ever fold.

When I brought some of these allegations up to you in our conversation, you denied a few of them directly and evaded responding to others. As an investigative journalist and a concerned member of the Neopagan Community, I have no way of knowing how many of these very serious accussations against you may be true - but without published financial reports, neither does anybody else! Hundreds of thousands of dollars have been donated to Circle over the years, yet no one seems to know where it has all gone, and you're not saying. You told me that neither federal nor Wisconsin law requires you to file or publish financial reports. Yet hadn't it ever occurred to you that sooner or later the people who had been giving you all that money would want to know what you had done with it - and that they would have a moral right to know?

When the broken-hearted people who thought they were members of Circle tried to confront you over these issues of power and accountability, your response was to bring in a lawyer who reacted to all criticism and questioning with threatened lawsuits. At that meeting you danced around the issues that people brought up, never giving a straight answer to any question. Instead you focussed on your anger towards those who had used Circle' mailing list to share their fears and concerns. Your comments on all of this in Circle Network News omitted most of teh serious criticism that had been laid against you and Circle, and implied that nothing negative was happening. Your phone conversation with me consisted of a few direct denials, dozens of evasions, efforts to pump me for my sources, and repeated threats of unspecified legal and other troubles for me and ADF if I persisted in my plans to publish the results of my investigation.

This behavior is not what we expect from a world-famous Neopagan organization run by someone many consider to be a Neopagan saint. What has gone wrong? I am inevitably reminded of the scandals surrounding the P.T.L. organization and the fact that no Christian leader was willing to criticize the Bakkers until after the media exposed them. The scandal almost destroyed the entire field of televangelism. That might seem good to Neopagans, but now the shoes are on our feet.

Now it's one of our leaders who seems to behaving in an unethical and irresponsible manner. What should we do, Selena? Should we all be silent and pretend that nothing is wrong, while we hope for your probles to go away by themselves? Should we wait until Circle blows up in our faces, strengthening the biases of those who are opposed to the very idea of large public Neopagan churches? Should we wait until you are investigated by

hostile outside forces, making it infinately harder for other Neopagans to get fair treatment - and no doubt leading to yet another fundraising campaign to protect you from "anti-Pagan persecution"? Most importantly, would such inaction on our part benefit the community or the Earth?

I'm not saying that ADF and I are perfect in regard to all these issues. ADF's finances were confused for several years, first because I was paying out of my own pocket for most of our expenses (and seldom kept receipts), and later because our bookkeeper was an inexperienced volunteer (now we have a professional accountant on the Board). We have not always delivered on time the products or publications that we promised our members. But, by the Gods, when we have made mistakes, we have admitted it. We publish our by-laws so that all our members know the rules to our game, we print financial statements to let our members know how their money is spent, and we make available the minutes from our Board meetings so everyone will know how and why decisions are made. When our members have offered legitimate complaints about how we have handled things, we have listened carefully and then tried to respond appropriately.

I will admit to some envy of you and Circle. When I think of all the good that might have been accomplished by ADF (or by any of a dozen other public Neopagan churches) is we had had one-half of your income, I get both sad and angry. I've spent my entire adult life, as have other Neopagan leaders, living far below the economic level that my skills could earn me, suriving on an income less than that of most members of the Neopagan community just so I could devote myself to the work I believe the Gods want me to do.
It infuriates me to see enough money flowing into Circle to staff three Neopagan Churches with full-time clergy, vanishing into fairyland without a trace. Of course it's obvious, to everyone who knows you, that you and Dennis are not living luxuriously. This makes the vanishing money all the more puzzling.

I realize that you are not going to appreciate my criticism and that I am now on your enemies list for the rest of my life. It doesn't matter. I would be betraying both the Earth Mother and my own principles if I didn't speak out before matters get even worse.

You have publically asked for suggestions as to how Circle should grow. You've said that you want to put the past behind you and concentrate, as always, on "positive energies." OK, here are some positive steps you and Circle should take:

Start by admitting, in your own publications, so that all your followers will hear you, that Circle has made some serious mistakes and that you are a fallible human being.

Adopt and publish a set of by-laws that lets people know who the members
of Circle are, and what voting rights, if any, they may have.

Put several more people on your Board of Directors and publish their names, and let us all know how and why they got there. They don't all have to be in your local area - telephone conference calls work just fine for Board meetings.

If you haven't already done so, open a seperate personal checking account
for yourself and your husband. Have someone other than you or Dennis write the checks for Circle. If you've both taken vows of poverty to the church and are therefore entitled to be supported by it, say so. Hire a full time bookkeeper (you can afford the wages), and publish annual financial reports.
Hire a C.P.A. to run an inventory on all Circle's property and publish the results. Publish the details on all the land payments you have made and how
much is still owed.

Design, publish and implement a training program for you clergy so that someone other than you and Dennis can be leaders someday. Make sure that you both genuinely qualify under the training system standards yourselves.

If you're going to continue to present Circle as a networking organization,
put all your names and addresses into a database, add confidentiality safeguards as requested, update the list frequently, and share this data with
those who write in and request it. Otherwise you should announce to the community that you aren't doing referrals anymore, and why.

Publish a detailed explanation of your policies for controlling access to the Circle Sanctuary so that people who have donated money will know under what circumstances they may use the land they have paid for.

Except for the last point, these are all things that we in ADF have done
or are now trying to do. Many other Neopagan groups have done some of them.
They are normal for most mainstream churches, large and small. Your local Unitarian Universalist congregation can probably give you advice on the details. Or you could ask the folks at any of a dozen other large Neopagan groups, most of whom have been doing these sort of things for years.

When I talked to you on the phone, you said that you were planning on publishing by-laws and financial reports, and making other major changes, before the end of the year. You said that turning 40 (as I did last year) and other brushes with mortality had turned your thoughts towards setting up
Circle to run without you. Yet I find it hard to believe you will take the necessary steps without the glare of a community spotlight being focused

on you - hence this open letter. If you can prove me wrong and make all the organizational changes that are necessary to turn Circle into something we can all be proud of again, I will be delighted.

Perhaps more important than these organizational steps, you might consider taking a sabatical for a year or two, turning Circle over to someone you still trust. You need to get back in touch with the ideals that brought you to Neopaganism in the first place.

But don't expect people in the Neopagan community to continue to send you hundreds of thousands of dollars until you have proven beyond a reasonable doubt that Circle is open, honest, democratic, and financially responsible.

--- Isaac

A PS TO MY FELLOW NEOPAGANS:

I'm sure that the preceeding opinions have shocked and offended many of you, especially those of you who love Selena. It is only after much meditation and pain that I have decided to publish this letter as widely as possible in the Neopagan community. We need to discuss the issues in depth, both to help heal Circle and to prevent such trouble from happening again to other groups. Perhaps we need to develop a detailed code of ethics for running the increasing number of public Neopagan churches. Perhaps we need a fair and practical listing of what sort of behavior we expect from our leaders - as part of a "Neopagan Common Law."

I hope that you will meditate upon the issues and discuss them with your friends. Ask the leaders of any other large Neopagan group you may belong to whether they have taken steps similar to those I have suggested to Selena. Send your thoughts to Slena at Circle, PO Box 219, Mt. Horeb, WI 53572. Send a copy to me at PO Box 9420, Newark DE 19714, marked "Circle Controversy." We will publish a fair representation of the responses in the next issue of D.P., along wth any reply that Selena may care to make.

Please don't respond to this open letter by criticizing me or A.D.F. As I have admitted many times in the past, I have feet of clay going up to my waist, have a gigantic ego, and have made many mistakes in running ADF and other Neopagan organizations over the years. My virtues or vices are not relevant to the situation at Circle, nor is my rudeness in pointing out matters in public that many would prefer to keep private.

Circle's current problems represnt an inevitable growth stage, not just for itself and Selena, but for the community as a whole. As our population soars, we are faced with important questions about power, accountability, and ethics. Whether or nor Selena is willing to honestly and openly

address the issues, it's about time that the rest of us started thrashing them
out. Perhaps after discussing this with your friends, you may want to make some changes in your own groups. Indeed, the situation at Circle has already
sparked some major policy revisions and new by-laws for ADF and other Neopagan churches as well.

I'm definately not saying that Neopagans should stop giving money to our
growing number of public Neopagan churches. After all, large scale activities
do require large scale resources. What I am suggesting is that we boycott groups who ask for large donations (or small ones constantly), until we see
their by-laws, financial reports, and minutes of their board meetings. This
is the simple sort of common sense that any consumer advocate would advise.
If we're going to give financial, emotional, political, or magical support to a group, let's make sure that it's being run in a publically accessible,
honest, and responsible manner. Otherwise, we're no wiser than the folks who
kept the Bakkers in buisness for so long.

Let's all pay careful attention to Selena's response to this open letter.
Will she send out a mass mailing telling her followers that everything is fine and to "think positive"? Will she try to sue me for daring to voice concerns held by many? Will she publish negative gossip about me (theres plenty available) in an attempt to discredit my criticism and avoid answering my questions? WIll she simply ignore this letter, knowing that the vast majority of her support comes from new members of the community who will not have read it? Or will she deal forthrightly with the issues involved and open Circle up to democratic participation by its members? Only time will tell.

On a personal note, I'd like to ask the members of the Neopagan community
to stop expecting our leaders, national or local, to be infallible, impeccable, infinately strong, Neopagan Saints. Almost all of us come from dysfunctional families, are survivors of various forms of abuse, and/or have had problems with addiction, obsession, or eating disorders. We are all subject to depression and professional burnout. This is the same profile
shared by clergy in other religions and people in other helping professions.
As leaders, we need your support (Finnancial, emotional and spiritual). We also need your commpassionate and thoughtful criticism to warn us when we start to go off the deep end. Hubris, the overwhelming pride that offends the Gods, can be caused by uncritical folowers as easily as by our own egos,
with disasterous results for the whole community.

As Selena has Shown Us.

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